

# Forest Legacy Project

## Welannee Watershed Forest

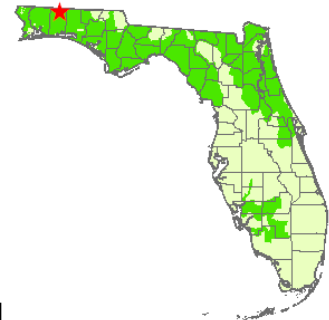
Okaloosa County, Florida



### FUNDING HISTORY

FY 2021 Forest Legacy Program Funding \$2,600,000  
FY 2021 Non-Federal Cost Share \$925,000  
FY 2021 Project Costs \$3,525,000  
FY 2021 Project Acres 2,348

Forest Legacy Funding To Date \$2,900,000  
Total Project Costs \$10,485,000  
Total Project Acres 7,205



★ Project Location  
Forest Legacy Areas

Tract Name	Size (ac)	Tract Cost	FLP Funding	Non-Fed Cost Share	Status
East Tract	2,040	\$3,060,000	\$2,295,000	\$765,000	Proposed 2022
South Tract	2,817	\$3,900,000	\$2,900,000	\$1,000,000	Funded 2020
West Tract	2,348	\$3,525,000	\$2,600,000	\$925,000	Proposed 2021

### GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The 8,370-acre Welannee Watershed Forest (Welannee) contains the 2,805-acre South Tract, 2,348-acre West Tract, 2,040-acre East Tract and 1,177-acre Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP) Tract. The purchase of CONSERVATION EASEMENTS on these tracts will substantially complete protection of the Yellow River from the Florida-Alabama line to its outlet into Blackwater Bay on the Gulf of Mexico.

Welannee supports the regional military mission and economy by buffering the Yellow River along important training corridors for Eglin Air Force Base (Eglin AFB) and is targeted by a RCP for longleaf pine, gopher tortoise and military readiness. Welannee benefits important freshwater habitat for a federally-threatened fish and other aquatic listed species, and maintains the water quality of the Yellow River as it flows into the Yellow River Marsh Aquatic Preserve. Restoration of thousands of acres of longleaf pine and prescribed fire will increase terrestrial rare species populations and enhance habitats, provide a scenic setting for paddling a state-designated canoe trail, support hunting opportunities for wounded veterans and youth, and preserve a trail and river crossing used by President Andrew Jackson and troops in 1818.



The Yellow River from the bank of West Tract (Photo by Keith Fountain)

## PROJECT FEATURES

### Important

- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS-TIMBER:** Welanee is enrolled in the Florida Forest Stewardship Program and managed by the landowner's certified forester employee using equipment stored onsite in a 7,500 square feet facility to implement his silviculture and longleaf pine restoration objectives.
- Welanee contributes to economic and conservation metrics of America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative for restoring and sustainably managing longleaf pine in the largest longleaf pine landscape in North America, an assemblage of public and private lands containing over 1 million acres.
- Welanee supports the Pensacola region forest products industry that provides over 5,000 jobs and produces annual revenues exceeding \$1 billion by satisfying market demand with its sales of loblolly and longleaf pine pulp, chip and saw, and saw log timber to three area mills.
- Site Indexes range as high as 90 on West Tract, providing some of the most productive timberland in the Welanee project. Timber stands are managed to chip and saw or saw log in the more productive areas, with harvesting of pine pulp for a more rapid transition to longleaf in remaining stands.
- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS-NON-TIMBER:** Welanee supports the \$8.8 billion economic impact to Okaloosa County from Eglin AFB and its network of airfields and facilities, the largest employment industry in the county by a factor of two, by protecting critical lands and waters that support the military mission.
- Welanee protects clean freshwater in the Yellow River that flows into the salinity-sensitive coastal marsh, seagrasses and oyster reef habitats of Pensacola Bay that support a diversity of mussels, oysters, crabs, shrimp and fish that are important to the commercial and recreational economy.
- **THREATENED OR ENDANGERED SPECIES HABITAT:** Welanee protects over 24 miles of shoreline along both sides of the Yellow River where it is designated as critical habitat for the Gulf sturgeon, federally listed as threatened by the National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
- While Welanee uplands were converted to loblolly pine plantations by past owners, extensive remnants of longleaf pine community elements are evident, and frequent fire rotations introduced by the landowner since 2005 are restoring diverse native grassland communities.
- Extensive, intact floodplain forest stretches the entire length of Welanee with numerous oxbows and sloughs. High bluffs exceeding 50 feet overlook much of the Yellow River and the extensive broadleaf communities include at least one confirmed state endangered plant, the Florida flame azalea.
- **FISH, WILDLIFE, PLANTS, AND UNIQUE FOREST COMMUNITIES:** Like some other major river basins in panhandle Florida, Welanee is biologically noteworthy for remnant natural communities that reflect both Appalachian and Coastal Plain ecoregion species and natural communities.
- Welanee harbors at least six rare and imperiled freshwater fish, as well as two species documented by the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI): the state Species of Special Concern Alligator snapping turtle and Escambia map turtle (G2/S2).
- Nine state or federally endangered plant species are identified by FNAI as potentially occurring at Welanee, including the Panhandle lily, Hummingbird flower and White-top pitcher plant, together with iconic longleaf animal species like gopher tortoise, eastern indigo snake and Florida pine snake.
- Welanee's bluffs and floodplain terraces support diverse and mature broadleaf-dominated forests with swamp chestnut oak, mockernut hickory, beech, mountain laurel and other upland and bottomland hardwoods that also support populations of the eastern chipmunk, considered rare (S2) in Florida.



Ongoing harvest of loblolly pine by landowner's crew and equipment (Photo by Keith Fountain)

- **WATER SUPPLY, AQUATIC HABITAT AND WATERSHED PROTECTION:** Welannee protects 12 percent (14.7 miles) of the 118-mile Yellow River as it flows south from the Florida-Alabama state line to Blackwater Bay and the other coastal estuaries on the Gulf of Mexico.
- Welannee protects 8,370 acres and improves management of forests that buffer 21 linear miles of creeks in the 1,365 square-mile Yellow River watershed, one of three major rivers flowing into Pensacola Bay. West Tract contains Big Creek, the largest tributary of the river north of County Road 2.
- The relatively pristine and stable conditions of the Yellow River as it flows through Welannee provide high value for wildlife, freshwater fish and the coastal estuaries important to estuarine biodiversity and the local economy.
- Welannee forests protect clean, fresh waters of the Yellow River flowing to the Yellow River Marsh Aquatic Preserve at Blackwater Bay, then East Bay and Pensacola Bay, which balance salinity for estuaries.
- **PUBLIC ACCESS:** West Tract is used to host Operation Outdoor Freedom hunts for wounded veterans and youth wildlife hunts sponsored by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.
- **SCENIC:** West Tract protects the viewshed immediately upstream from the South Tract launch point for the 54-mile state-designated Yellow River paddling trail from uses incompatible with this spectacular outdoor recreation experience.
- **HISTORICAL/CULTURAL:** I.G. Searcy's 1829 Map of Florida documents a trail used by President Andrew Jackson and 1,200 men as they crossed Welannee on a 225-mile, 18-day march to confront Seminole Indians in Pensacola, Florida. Historic trails on Welannee and cypress pilings in the river remain today.

## Threatened

- **LACK OF PROTECTION:** Okaloosa County currently allows, without rezoning, development of the 2,348-acre West Tract at a density of one residential unit per 10 acres, or 234 total units.
- State and Okaloosa County regulations do not prohibit many agricultural, residential, institutional and general commercial uses of the West Tract that could result in the conversion of its forests to nonforest uses.
- The flight corridor component of the Eglin AFB military mission is threatened by the incompatible residential density and outdoor lighting that would result from commercial and residential development of the eight miles of Yellow River frontage contained in the West Tract.
- **LAND AND LANDOWNER'S CIRCUMSTANCE:** The Welannee landowner also owns and manages Henry Company Homes, northwest Florida's largest residential new home builder, with projects near the beaches and military installations throughout the western Florida panhandle.
- Welannee was purchased in 2005 for Henry Company Homes' long-term need for land for residential development to satisfy the rapid residential and commercial growth experienced in Okaloosa County, particularly north of Eglin AFB.
- From 2010-2015, Okaloosa County had the greatest population growth in the 13-county western Florida panhandle region. This growth is concentrated in the north half of the county containing Welannee since the south half of the county is essentially Eglin AFB or developed coastal properties.
- **ADJACENT LAND USE:** West Tract is increasingly threatened by rural residential and agricultural conversion of lands north of County Road 2, particularly along the county roads that bisect the West Tract. Peanut farming is increasingly a threat with recent land purchases by a major producer.
- **ABILITY TO DEVELOP:** West Tract is 65% uplands with unique, spectacular Yellow River and creek



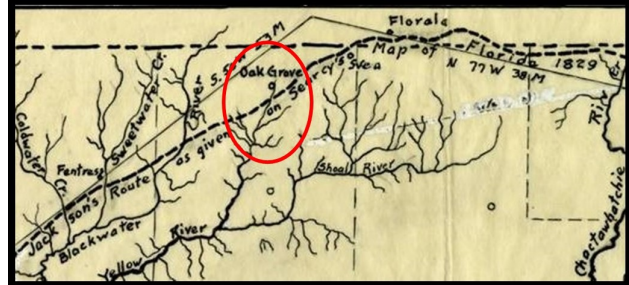
Creek ravine representative of both Appalachian and Coastal remnant habitats (Photo by Catherine Ingram)



views, and direct access provided by several public roads with utilities, making residential and commercial development or agricultural conversion of the property very feasible and attractive.

## Strategic

- **CONSERVATION INITIATIVE:** Welannee advances all three key outcomes - establishing new longleaf forests, converting mixed stands to longleaf and increasing the use and frequency of prescribed fire - identified in the 2019-2021 Strategic Priorities and Actions update by America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative, a collaboration of state and federal agencies and stakeholders.
- Welannee supports A Land Conservation Vision for the Gulf of Mexico Region developed by the Partnership for Gulf Coast Land Conservation, a coalition of more than 24 conservation organizations within the five Gulf of Mexico states, by protecting identified priority lands in the Yellow River watershed related to scenic rivers and longleaf pine habitat.
- Welannee supports the Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership mission to conserve and restore the dwindling longleaf pine ecosystem by expanding the protected lands corridor north along the Yellow River and restoring thousands of acres to longleaf pine habitat through the removal of loblolly plantations and implementation of a regular prescribed fire program.
- **CONSERVATION PLAN-NATIONAL:** Welannee supports the objective to prevent further population reductions identified in the federally-threatened Gulf Sturgeon Recovery/Management Plan developed by the National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service by protecting over 14 miles of the Yellow River and its spawning areas designated as critical habitat.
- **CONSERVATION PLAN-REGIONAL:** Welannee is located in identified military and planning zones and advances the Eglin Joint Land Use Study and Tri-County Small Area Studies by abating threats associated with height of objects, outdoor lighting and radio interference by preventing incompatible uses in identified corridors associated with low-level helicopter training and cruise missiles.
- **CONSERVATION PLAN-STATE:** Welannee furthers 2012 Florida Wildlife Action Plan strategies related to protection of important lands and waters by preserving 8,370 acres in the Yellow River basin (a highest ranking priority with a high number of Species of Greatest Conservation Need) and preventing residential development, a high to very high threat based on the threat analysis of upland habitats.
- Welannee furthers 2010 Florida Forest Action Plan national and regional priorities related to conserving working forest landscapes and improving prescribed fire by protecting 8,370 acres of working forest adjacent to public conservation lands that is being restored to longleaf pine production with a two-year fire rotation.
- Maintaining the healthy forests of Welannee furthers the Land Acquisition Workplan and 2017 Pensacola Bay System Surface Water Improvement and Management Plan of the Northwest Florida Water Management District, which identify the property as a priority to protect the relatively high-quality Yellow River from stormwater runoff pollution caused by adjacent incompatible land use activities.
- Welannee supports a RCPP targeted at securing private working forests to benefit longleaf pine, gopher tortoise and other listed species, and military readiness. The RCPP Tract has been formally included in the RCPP and efforts are underway to purchase a CONSERVATION EASEMENT through the Healthy Forests Reserve Program.
- **COMPLEMENT PROTECTED LANDS:** Welannee expands the protected shoreline of the Yellow River north over 14 miles beyond the 16,500-acre Yellow River Water Management Area, and shares a boundary with the 211,000-acre Blackwater River State Forest. The north boundary of West Tract is adjacent to the proclamation boundary of Conecuh National Forest.



Andrew Jackson's 1818 route across the Yellow River on map by Mark Boyd (Photo by State Library of Florida)

## Readiness

Pre-Appraisal/Market Analysis	1
Easement or Fee Conditions	1
Non-Federal Cost Share Commitment	0
Signed Purchase Agreement	0
Title Search	1
Mineral Determination	1
Stewardship Plan (or equivalent)*	1
<b>Readiness Total Tally Score</b>	<b>5</b>

## Supporting Parties

Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Florida Forest Service; Northwest Florida Water Management District; Conservation Florida; National Wild Turkey Federation; Longleaf Alliance; and Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership.

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